

LETTERS HOME

SUMMARY: Students will pretend to be pioneers and write a realistic letter to a friend "back home." Letters will describe the hopes and hardships of their westward journey in the 1850s.

GOAL: To introduce students through personal narratives to life as pioneers traveling west in the 1850s

OBJECTIVES: By the end of the lesson, students (as role-playing pioneer children) will be able to describe in written form (1) why they are making the trip, (2) what they miss and what they look forward to, (3) their favorite things about the trip, and (4) the worst part of the journey.

GRADE LEVEL: Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh

TIME REQUIRED: Two 45 to 60 minute sessions

LOCATION: Classroom

MATERIALS: Overhead projector, several transparent sheets and markers, attached 1850s United States map, and pencil and paper for each student

SUBJECTS: CA History, Economics, Language Arts

KEY WORDS:

Fort - a way-station to rest, make repairs, send and receive mail, and purchase or barter for supplies. These were not Army forts, but commercial establishments.

Wagon - the main mode of transportation for the emigrants which was covered with canvas (painted for waterproofing) and was four by twelve by three feet deep. Wagons were purchased or built at home before departure. Iron straps reinforced stress points and iron rims on the wheels were used as tires.

Scurvy - disease caused by lack of fresh fruits and vegetables in the diet. Usually prevented by eating dried fruits, pickles, or vinegar along the trail. (It was not yet widely known that lack of vitamin C was the cause of scurvy.)

Cookstove - cast iron, box-shaped, wood burning stove carried in the wagons for heat and meal preparation.

Journals, diaries, letters - handwritten personal accounts of the daily lives of the westward migrants. Ink and paper were important items of trade at the forts, as many pioneers kept written records of their journeys.

BACKGROUND: This activity may be done in conjunction with the Emigrant West activity although it is not required.

A family's decision to join the westward migration in the 1850s meant leaving behind everything that was familiar, enduring a rugged, sometimes life-threatening journey, and starting a new life in a new land. Letters were the only link to the friends and family they had left behind.

Journals, diaries, and letters of the emigrants breathe life into the facts of their westward trek, a journey that changed the lands west of the Mississippi forever.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE:

Before beginning the activity prepare the following: (1) make overhead transparency of 1850 United States map, (2) prepare paper copies of 1850 map for students, and (3) if desired, duplicate the letter-writing instructions to distribute to students for reference as they work.

Brainstorm with the class some of the reasons families decided to travel west. List on an overhead transparency: (1) open land (640 acres free from government versus \$200 for 160 acres), (2) depression of 1837 and drop in farm prices, (3) less crowded, less competition for jobs, (4) stories of rich soil, mild weather, riches just waiting to be made, (5) sense of adventure, and (6) criminals escaping the Law.

(1) Ask students to measure out the size of a wagon on the classroom floor (four feet wide by twelve feet long with three foot sides, and a canvas roof with pockets sewn inside for extra storage) and to imagine carrying all their supplies in that space. (2) Ask them to brainstorm what tools, foods, and supplies would be needed and to list their ideas on a transparency (duplicate for folders). (3) Add more items to the list such as: shovel, pick ax, saw, wagon repair parts, rope, strong knife, rifle, and ammunition. Lamps, fuel oil, candles, matches, iron cookstove, large kettle, skillet, teapot, butter churn, eating utensils, and water barrels. Clothes, cradle, chest of linens and blankets, medicines, and ground cloths. A bushel of dried fruit and 200 pounds of flour per person, bacon, molasses, vinegar (to fight scurvy), coffee, beans, rice, cornmeal, and jerky.

Project the 1850s map and ask students to locate a few of the main starting points for the travelers. Compare to recent United States map.

Discuss the following: (1) How the migrants got to the starting points (steamboat, paddle-wheeler, train, or spring wagon). (2) How they joined a group and hired a guide for the trip (leaders advertised through meetings and word of mouth, travelers had to consider cost, trustworthiness of the leader, and whether they could get along with other members of the group). (3) How they gathered and paid for the essential equipment and livestock (by selling their farms, homes, livestock, furniture, and businesses).

Ask students to locate the first forts the travelers might reach on the map. Use the map key to estimate distance and how many days it took to reach the first fort. (If the migrants had to cross a river or push the wagons up steep mountains, parties could travel only a few miles

a day. Across the plains, where water and feed for the livestock were scarce, the groups pushed ahead as fast as possible, covering as much as twenty miles in a day.)

Relate how the travelers relished their layover at a fort. They could hear news, bathe and do laundry, replenish food supplies, repair wagons, get medical help, rest their oxen, and send and receive letters.

Read aloud this list of items they could barter for or purchase at a fort from 1852 journals and letters: a new coat traded for 400 pounds of flour, a satin evening dress traded for a pair of used trail boots, a beaded purse for a cow, suspenders for 75 cents, meat for a week for two dollars, and baby shoes for one dollar.

To begin the letter-writing activity, read the following to the class: You are a child traveling west with your family. When you started the trip, you left behind your home, your school, and your friends. Now you are "laying over" at a fort for a few days. Write a letter to your best friend. Describe what your days are like, your chores, what you eat, and where you sleep at night. Tell your friend why your family wanted to make the journey. Include your feelings about the trip, what you're looking forward to, what you miss, and what frightens you. Include whether you believe the trip is worthwhile and if your friend's family should attempt it, too.

If desired, distribute copies of the instructions for student reference.

Allow time for student writing.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT: Art/Crafts - Stitch together a class quilt from scraps. Use it as a wall hanging or in a reading area. Make willow whistles and corn husk dolls, favorite toys of pioneer children. Recreation - Play a few of the games enjoyed by pioneer children, such as "Drop the Handkerchief," "Pointer's Bluff," or "Hunt the Ring."

ASSESSMENT: Use the student letters for assessment. Have the students share their letters in class. Discuss and evaluate the content of the letters in relation to the lesson objectives.